

When Babies Scream

Why babies scream and what to do
by Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Honig: I have a baby in my program who sometimes screams uncontrollably and seems angry. I can never seem to figure out what's causing this, and I'm not sure what to do when it happens. What's going on?

When a baby screams, that is a signal that all is not well for the body of the baby, for her emotional well-being, and/or for the baby's relationship with the teacher. During the first year of life, infants learn that adults are in control of providing reassuring care. Adults will "make things better" when a baby's tummy feels horribly empty, when gas bubbles cause such pain that her legs jerk upward, when her skin turns bluish from cold, or when she cries in despair when left alone without tender comfort. In other words, we teach a baby gradually to learn self-control as we, the adults, meet baby's needs promptly and appropriately. When babies have not built up these trusting feelings, they may cry or scream in despair. The cry is a loud and strong signal, and is the only communication tool that a baby really has to tell you that all is not well.

Search for Reasons

Teachers need to be good detectives. Go through a careful checklist of what may be the difficulty. Hunger? Thirst? A need for tender caresses? A need for someone to coo and "talk" with? Too sudden a change from being cared for by parents to being cared for by teachers during a long childcare day?

Consider the Senses

Sometimes a baby has "sensory integration difficulties." The baby may be overly sensitive to loud noises in the room. She may need very soft cotton material next to her skin rather than other clothing materials. Or, she may be uncomfortable with light tactile pressure on her skin and need firmer holding and patting.

Remember Tender Touch

Babies need their skin caressed. If left alone too much of the day they may scream from feeling abandoned and lonely. If they are new to school then the arms of the teacher, her voice tones, her scent, and her ways of ministering to the infant's needs may feel too different from what the baby is used to. As a result, she may scream in terror.

Screaming shows that the young one is still fighting for her rights as a baby. When babies "give up," and feel only sadness that their deepest needs are not being met, they cease screaming or crying.

Watch for Self-Regulation

If adults have been attentive to an infant's signals of discomfort, hunger, thirst, and need for cuddling, then the infant does indeed learn self-control techniques, even within the first year of life. For example, a nursing learns that after she wakes and whimpers for a feeding, that she can pop her thumb into her mouth and suck to comfort herself rather than scream loudly. The baby has already learned, during the early months of life, to trust that an adult will be there as soon as possible with warm milk from breast or bottle. She is able to exhibit patience. That ability to wait for a feeding—until the adult has changed her diaper and brought her to a comfortable rocking chair—shows the dawning of self-control.

As you meet babies' physical and emotional needs, calmly and day by day, the screaming should modulate. Remember to always follow through. You must come to her ready to meet her needs. ECT

Box: Signs of Self-Control

- When a baby screams, ask yourself: Is the baby having painful gas bubbles? Does she need you to use a lower, slower, and more soothing voice tone when talking at close range? Have her parents abruptly switched her from a bottle to a cup and given you instructions not to allow the bottle?
- In order to get the baby to modulate screaming, start a process of giving her 5 to 10 minute massages with non-allergenic oils a couple of times during the day.
- Enlist the parents' help. Inquire about screaming at home. If it happens, how do the parents handle it?
- If the parents use comforting methods that work, such as jiggling baby in their arms while walking the floor, try that, too. If the parents find that a pacifier works well, be sure to ask for several so that you can use these to help baby self-comfort with the "binky."
- If the baby puts out her foot to "help" as you struggle to put on a sock or a sneaker, remember to thank the baby. She is trying to be still for you and is really showing control of her bodily movements when she would rather be wiggling, playing, or moving about.
- Decide when and how to ask for help. If the baby has been in your care for several months, you have been intimately attentive to her needs and promptly alleviated her distress (such as a soaked diaper or need for burping), and the screaming still continues,

you may gently express concern and ask the parents to have a pediatrician examine the infant. This will ensure that there is no physical reason for the screaming.

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